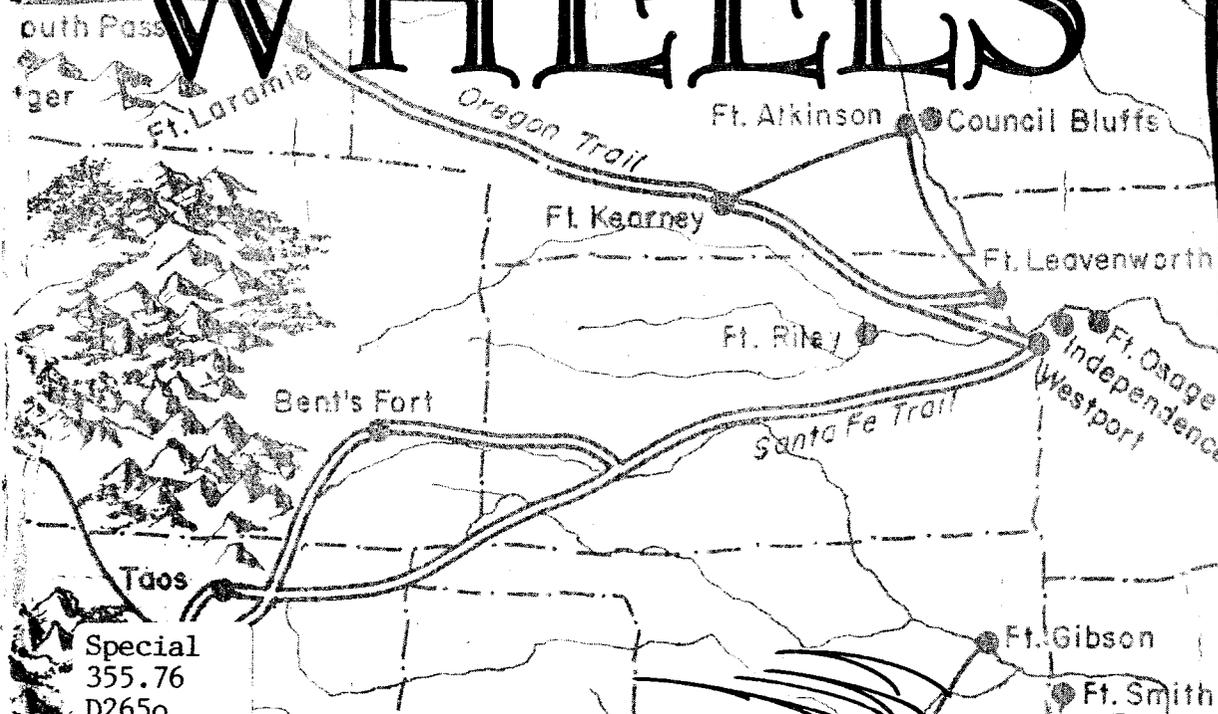


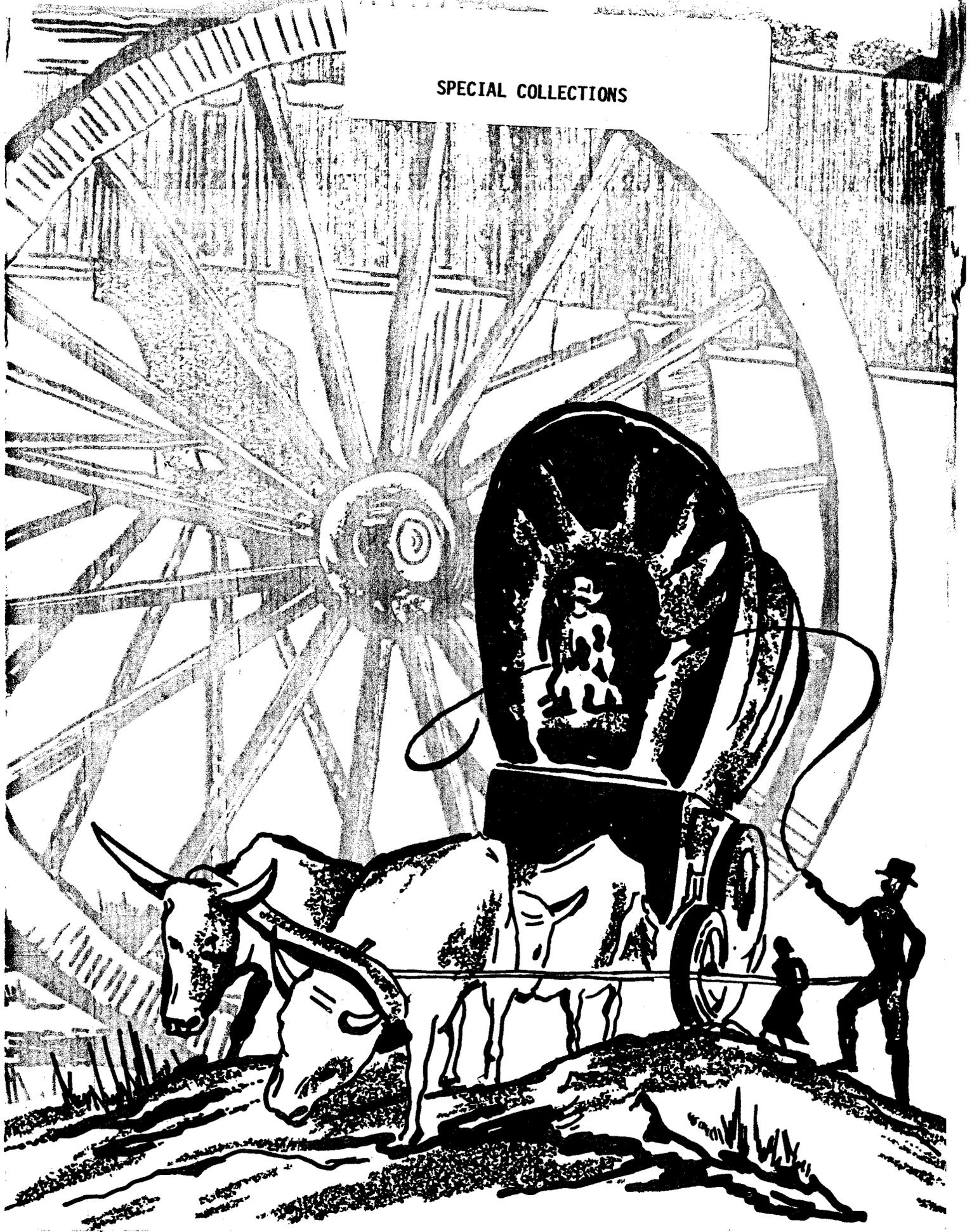
OLD ROLLING WHEELS



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SPECIAL COLLECTIONS



Old
Rolling Wheels

by

COLONEL PAUL R. DAVISON, USA, RETIRED



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FOREWORD

The history of Fort Leavenworth is the history of our country. From its beginning in 1827, Fort Leavenworth was involved in the onward development of the West. Troops stationed here escorted wagon trains, campaigned against the Indians, built forts, made maps and explored new territory that had been seen only by an occasional trapper or "mountain man".

In the latter part of the 19th Century Fort Leavenworth became a military school, evolving over the years into the Command and General Staff College. In this century, Fort Leavenworth's contribution to our country's history has been in educating the commanders and staff officers who have led our forces to victory on the far-flung battlefields of World War I and II and Korea and who are now leading our men in Viet Nam.

This booklet reflects Fort Leavenworth's earlier historical contribution. In its pages the reader will find some of the flavor of those adventurous and colorful times when the courage and stamina and enterprise of our forebearers laid the country's foundation in the West. The United States Army played a major role in those dramatic events.



MICHAEL S. DAVISON
Major General, USA

OLD ROLLING WHEELS

Time, despite the overwhelming development of motorization and mechanization, has failed to obliterate the ruts and scars made by the iron-bound old rolling wheels that groaned along historic routes such as the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails.

A few individuals, not too old to dream, could close their eyes and remember the stories

over the Raton Pass, and the arid, rocky marches beyond, until the banks of the meandering, crystal clear Rio Grande were reached. Most of the stories would climax at Santa Fe. Those who did not reach the warm, open arms of Santa Fe, or failed to make the perilous march back, did not live to tell their stories.

Along the trail are invisible ghosts left by



Last Chance Store, Council Grove

told by grandparents of the thrills and hardships along the Oregon and the old Santa Fe Trails. They were trails paved with either dust or mud, depending on the weather. Some of the stories of the Santa Fe Trail recount the driving sleet and piled up snow drifts along the headwaters of the Arkansas River, the hard pull

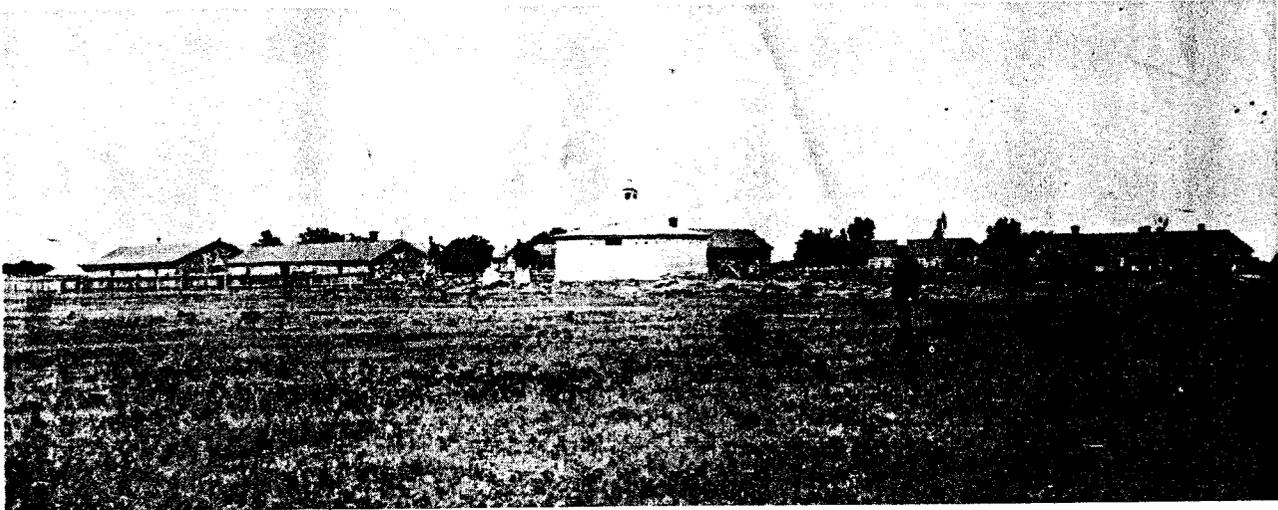
the wagon bosses, trappers, Osage warriors, government scouts, Pawnee Indians on the war-path; friendly pueblo traders, cavalry troopers, Mexican mule-skinners, and bandits; infantry soldier escorts and homesteaders.

Where an old rolling wheeled vehicle, filled with valuable trading commodities, started its

trip is of little consequence now. Certainly Fort Leavenworth was an important starting point for Santa Fe caravans, as well as Oregon emigrants. Points of departure of the Santa Fe traders moved up the Missouri River as settlement progressed. After Fort Leavenworth was founded in 1827, some military escort was provided as far as the Mexican border. Many wagon trains started the long journey from Fort Leavenworth, especially if the Indians were misbehaving. Normally, escort troops and wagon trains assembled at Council Grove.

then made a desperate effort to cut their way out, being killed to a man. Afterward, the Comanches, in respect for their courageous foes, erected, on the crest of the rock, a small pyramid of stones which remains today.

Fort Larned, at Pawnee Fork, was established in 1859, when the trade on the Santa Fe Trail had risen to more than \$10 million annually. The frontier post protected 400 miles of the trail, between Fort Riley and Bent's Fort. Here Generals Sherman, Sheridan, Custer, and Hancock helped to make history, assisted by



Fort Larned 1886

The colorful names of landmarks along the trail could suggest scenarios for western motion pictures. Consider these places: Cody Farm; Olathe; Dragoon Creek; Lone Elm; Council Grove, where Indians and traders sat and made a treaty, under tall and stately black walnut trees that are still standing; Diamond Springs; and Plum Buttes. There is Pawnee Rock, with many legends available to account for its name. General Philip St. George Cooke, who years earlier patrolled along the trail as a lieutenant, described the flat-faced, 40-foot, sandstone rock as "a natural monument inscribed with the names of all the fools that pass this way." He said that it gained its name from the siege of a small party of Pawnees by the Comanches. The rocky mound itself was impregnable, but the Pawnees became parched with thirst. They drank their horses' blood and

"Wild Bill" Hickok, "Buffalo Bill" Cody, and Kit Carson. Today Fort Larned is being restored. In one old barracks there is a fabulous collection of military and frontier arms. In a stable are authentic restorations of horseshoeing, saddlery, and harness shops.

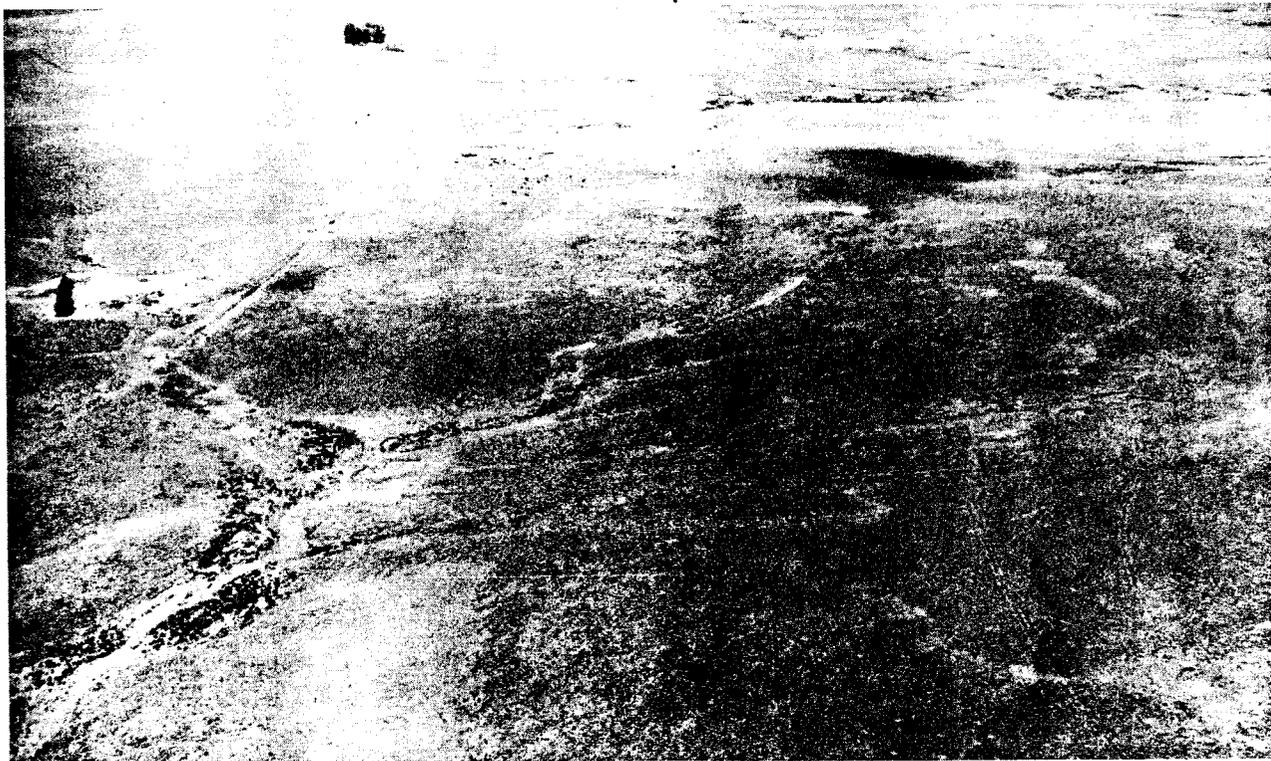
Other places along the trail are Fort Mann, Cimarron Crossing, and Dodge City, a tough old frontier spot now made more famous by Marshal Dillon of TV fame. Chouteau's Island, Medicine Horse, Sand Creek, Salt Bottom, Big Timbers, Little Chief, and Bent's Fort were locations with their names written in human blood, while being ruled by Colt's "Peacemaker."

From the Big Bend of the Arkansas, at Cimarron Crossing, the old Santa Fe Trail ran away from the friendly river and branched into two routes. One trail cut through the

mountains, via Bent's Fort, Raton Pass, and Eagle Nest, while the other generally meandered over El Jornada—deserts. The trails passed through such colorfully named places as Sangre de Cristo Pass, San Fernando de Taos, Wagon Mound, Fort Union, Las Vegas, and Pajarito (little woodpecker). Finally, all branches of the bloodthirsty old trailway reached the glamorous paradise of Santa Fe. The town of saintly faith, in all its glory, was filled with flesh pots, hot-blooded señoritas who bartered for the traders' wealth with kisses and lust, vino mescal, and too often with sudden death.

some Mexican rangers, Becknell was persuaded to take his goods on to New Mexico. The adventure was so successful that the next year he repeated it, using stout cargo wagons of the schooner type instead of pack mules. He could not find the trail across the Cimarron desert and his expedition failed. Becknell's nephew, Braxton Cooper, took a pack train to Santa Fe via the Raton-Taos route and realized a large profit. In 1823 Cooper again set forth. He was successful, this time bringing back, besides gold and silver, 400 mules and a large quantity of furs.

In 1824 began the fabulous frontier trading



Santa Fe trail ruts north of Allen in Lyon County

The Santa Fe Trail became a pioneer highway when Mexico freed herself from Spain in 1821 and, at the same time, discarded all trade restrictions with the States. Mexico was greatly in need of merchandise and had the wealth to pay for it handsomely. One of the first trade ventures was made by William Becknell, a Missourian, who took a pack train of goods out on the plains to trade with the Indians. Meeting

ventures in which a large number of merchants joined forces for protection, each contributing pack mules or wagons laden with merchandise. In the first expedition more than eighty traders organized a great caravan. Relying on strength in numbers and thoroughness of preparation, they left their prairie route at the Great Bend of the Arkansas River and struck out directly across the "desert" for Santa Fe. Needless to

say, they arrived in due course of time. They brought back over \$190,000 worth of silver, furs, and mules. A Vermont Yankee who led the expedition, Augustus Storrs, is credited with successfully inaugurating trade relations between the United States and Mexico in the southwest.

The trading route was given the name Santa Fe Trail. Those pioneers who followed this hazardous route from Franklin, the last settlement in Missouri, to Santa Fe, a distance of over 800 miles, encountered many difficulties and dangers. Although the road to Santa Fe was marked from Fort Osage to Santa Fe in 1825-26, prior to the establishment of Fort Leavenworth, the pioneer traders were aided greatly by Senator Thomas H. Benton of Missouri who induced Congress to provide for an accurate survey of the route. The commission of surveyors marked the usual route from Fort Leavenworth as far west as the Great Bend of the Arkansas by mounds of earth. From that point they designated the longer and safer route, along the Arkansas River via Bent's Fort, Trinidad, Raton Pass, Taos, and Las Vegas (New Mexico). The stronger caravans preferred to follow the dimly defined wagon tracks straight across the desert.

One of the principal reasons for the establishment of Fort Leavenworth was to furnish protection for the yearly wagon trains that were carrying on their trade between the States and Mexico, along the Santa Fe Trail. The first real military escort of a caravan on the trail set out in June of 1829. Lieutenant Philip St. George Cooke, later a general officer, gives a brilliant description of the festivities held when American troops met the caravan on its return trip from Santa Fe, at Chouteau's Island. The caravan was escorted by a detachment of the Mexican Army to the island, which at that time was the border between the United States and Mexico. The description is quoted:

"I distinctly remember the feast we gave them. Seated cross-legged around a green blanket in the bottom of the tent, we partook of bread, buffalo meat, and an extraordinary rarity, of some salt pork. But, to crown all were several large onions for which we were indebted to our arriving guests. A tin cup of

whisky which, like the salt pork, had been reserved for an unusual occasion, was followed by another of water.

"The next day we had time to look around us and to admire the strangest collection of men and animals that had, perhaps, ever met



on the frontier of the United States. There were a few Creoles, polished gentlemen, magnificently clothed in European costume; a large number of grave Spaniards, exiled from Mexico and on their way to the United States, with much property in stock and gold, their whole equipage, Spanish. There was a company of Mexican Regulars, as they were called, in uniform, mere apologies for soldiers. Several tribes of Indians, or Mexicans, much more formidable as warriors, were grouped about their horses, with spears planted in the ground. Frenchmen were there of course, but not in great numbers. Of course, my army detachment was there, hundred and eighty hearty veterans, in rags, but well armed and equipped for any service. Four, or five, languages were spoken. To complete the picture, must be mentioned, the two thousand horses, mules, and jackasses which kept up an incessant braying.

"The American troops were reviewed and drilled for the Mexican officers. A return banquet was given the American officers by the Mexicans. The Mexican colonel's tent was very large and comfortable. At the banquet several Mexican wines were served, which had been brought from Santa Fe for the occasion."

During the "Fighting Fifties," Fort Leavenworth was a general depot from which supplies were sent by old rolling wheels to many of the military posts, camps, forts, and stations west of the Missouri River, some as far west as the Pacific Ocean. These supplies were brought in on steam boats, of which there were a large

number making regular stops at Fort Leavenworth and other river towns. From Fort Leavenworth the supplies were rolled along the Santa Fe, Oregon, and other trails, in long trains of covered wagons.

Government transportation contracts, particularly for the supply of General Albert Sidney Johnston's army in Utah, were made by the famous firm of Russell, Majors, and Wadell, which had its headquarters in the town of Leavenworth, adjacent to Fort Leavenworth. In the town the firm established stores, warehouses, and blacksmith shops. Majors was the firm's manager on the plains. He had been reared at Independence, Missouri, and was a practical driver. He could easily handle a team of six or eight horses, or ten yoke of oxen. The business manager of the firm was William H. Russell, who spent most of his time in Leavenworth. Wadell, with his headquarters located in Lexington, Missouri, was the financial backer.

The valley of One-Mile Creek on the Fort Leavenworth Reservation, better known as Corral Creek, was at that time the center of reserve animal power for most of the transportation lines of the west. The large pastures along the creek corraled many thousands of horses, oxen, and mules belonging to both the government and the transportation companies.

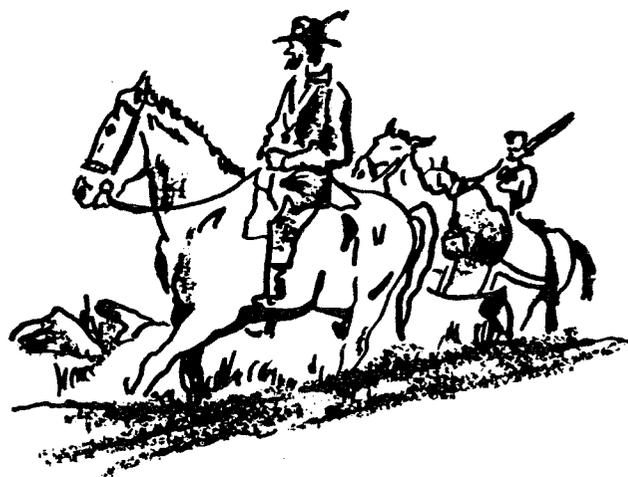
Mr. James Melines, a traveler, gives a clear picture of what he saw on Corral Creek:

"Returning to town [from Fort Leavenworth] I passed numbers of ox trains used in freighting merchandise to New Mexico. They are remarkable, each wagon team consisting of ten yokes of fine oxen, selected and arranged, not only for drawing, but for picturesque effect, in sets of twenty, either all black, all white, all spotted, or otherwise marked uniformly. Each set of twenty oxen draws from 6,500 to 8,000 pounds and makes the journey from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe at the contract rate of seven miles per day, about 130 days."

In an account of an overland journey from New York to San Francisco, which he took in 1859, Horace Greeley gives the following impression of activities in the southern part of Fort Leavenworth:

"Russell, Majors, and Wadell's transportation establishment, located between the Fort [Leavenworth] and the city [of Leavenworth] is a great feature of Leavenworth. Such scores of wagons! Such pyramids of extra axletrees! Such herds of oxen! Such regiments of drivers and other employees! No one who does not see can realize how vast a business this is, nor how immense its outlay as well as income. I presume the great firm has at this hour two millions of dollars invested in stock, mostly oxen, mules and wagons. (Last year they employed six thousand teamsters and worked 45,000 oxen.)"

It was this transportation firm of Russell, Majors, and Wadell, in Leavenworth, that in 1860 wrote the short, picturesque chapter "Pony Express" into the history of American transportation. By fast, hard riding, the Pony Express cut the light, special mail time between New York and San Francisco from twenty-one to eleven days.



Under the direction of the Fort Leavenworth Museum, many abandoned wagons and parts have been dug up on that section of the reservation through which flows Corral Creek. From the excavated pieces have been reconstructed several rare cargo vehicles, a few oxen yokes, and some harness fittings.

This little glimpse into history, given herein, is all too brief a review of some of the glories of Fort Leavenworth and the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. The stories that could be told about

the fort, the museum, and the trails to the west would fill volumes. Each one of the old vehicles in the museum could tell at least one good story of fact that would make fantastic fiction.

No narrative of the Santa Fe Trail can be complete without focusing attention on Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The post is a very important, large, modern Army installation, primarily engaged in conducting the famous United States Army Command and General Staff College to educate selected officers of the military forces of the United States and Allies of the world.

In the pioneer days Fort Leavenworth was an outpost—an advanced base from which supplies were taken from the river boats and sent into the wild west, loaded on prairie schooners drawn by oxen, mules, or horses. The routes west needed soldier protection. Fort Leavenworth was the base for troops to furnish the protective services.

In the mid-1930's, the War Department saw fit to station at Fort Leavenworth Lieutenant Colonels Frederick Gilbreath and Paul Davison. Both officers were of the west, loved it, and treasured its old relics. Mainly because of their efforts, Fort Leavenworth now includes a museum wherein is assembled a priceless collection

of old, authentic, reconstructed, animal-drawn vehicles. The collection is referred to by many oldtimers as "The Old Rolling Wheels."

Today there are not sufficient horses, mules, or oxen available to hitch up the whole collection of old vehicles at one time. Back just before World War II, however, there were enough draft animals at Fort Leavenworth to roll the whole group out together. Also, there were coachmen, footmen, and drivers of great ability who could handle six-line and jerk-line teams. Often on a holiday, the whole of the museum's collection of vehicles was hitched up, rolled out, and filled with merry people who enjoyed a real "Gay Nineties" jamboree.

At the time the museum was new, in the late 1930's, the centerpiece of the collection of old rolling wheels was a big, red, Concord stagecoach. It was built in Concord, New Hampshire, in 1834. The coach traveled all the way across the United States, as far west as The Dalles, Oregon, and back again, before its retirement from commercial use to its home in the Fort Leavenworth museum. It has plenty of company among the more than sixty authentic pieces of animal-drawn transportation in the museum.

